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October 20, 2010: What Does Altruism Tell Us About the Nature of the Universe?

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Title: What Does Altruism Tell Us About the Nature of the Universe?

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10/20/2010—Evolution is seen as a threat not only to the account of Creation in Genesis but to all morality because it is an amoral process. Unlike God, evolution does not start out to choose the good. Evolution just happens as organisms live and die. And it is not just religious believers who see this threat but many scientists have claimed that the notion of objective good goes out the window along with God and the Bible. This is why altruism—the tendency of organisms to sacrifice themselves for others—along with other qualities like cooperation, became important topics in evolution. Explaining them in evolutionary terms might save morality from the materialist ash heap. In a recent issue of the New York Review of Books, H. Allen Orr reviews *The Price of Altruism* by Oren Harman, an account of the life and work of George Price. (review here) Price's Equation showed how a trait could be passed within a group even while another trait in tension with it operated between individuals. So, selfish individuals might have an evolutionary advantage even though groups with cooperating individuals also have an evolutionary advantage. Both traits would be passed along. As interesting as the review is, we who are not evolutionary biologists might better take a different view of all this. What if T.H. Huxley was right (and Price wrong)—what if evolution leads to morally abhorrent results and human beings have to learn to train themselves through culture against what we would do naturally? Huxley's fear led to the decline of the natural law tradition and a general demoralization that continues to this day. But what Huxley forgot is that we human beings are nature in all our complexity. Evolution did not just select this or that trait. Evolution selected us. All of our possibilities represent natural selection. Our cultures are natural also. And if large brained animals are associated with increasing levels of empathy, which they are in nature however it happened, then nature selects for goodness along with intelligence. OK, so there is no God behind everything. That means Earth might lie in the path of an asteroid and that might be the end of us. But, on the other hand, the universe exhibits many of the traits that led the founders of our religions to see divinity somehow in it. The universe has not changed at all. It is still our basically good home. The religious mechanism—the supernatural God—is not necessary any more than it is necessary that we understand precisely how goodness evolved to consider it morally superior.